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ABSTRACT

Data were gathered in two phases during the 1984 presidential election campaign in an effort to examine the public's perceived information needs. In the first phase of the study, interviews were conducted with a small sample of Knoxville, Tennessee area adults to Tennessee area adults to ascertain their attitudes and perceptions concerning the election campaign, its coverage by the news media, and the types of information they found interesting or useful. In the second phase, respondents estimated the perceived distance between concepts representing the news media, types of information, and the attributes "interesting" and "decide how to vote." Findings suggest that respondents found information about candidate abilities and voting records to be significantly more useful in deciding how to vote than less substantive information. News media were perceived to emphasize information less useful and no more interesting. (Author/HOD) information less useful and no more interesting. (Author/HOD)

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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF ITS INFORMATION NEEDS AND THE UTILITY OF NEWS MEDIA CONTENT DURING THE 1984 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent to which the news media satisfied the perceived information needs of a sample of Knoxville, Tennessee adults during the 1984 presidential election campaign. Respondents estimated the perceived distance between concepts representing the news media, types of information and the attributes "interesting" and "decide how to vote."

An analysis of the multidimensional maps representing the spatial relationships among these cognitive concepts suggests that respondents found information about candidate abilities and voting records to be significantly more useful in deciding how to vote than less substantive types of information. The news media were perceived to emphasize dramatic aspects of the race, even though respondents rated this information less useful and no more interesting.

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Critics have contended for many years that news media coverage of presidential election campaigns tends to emphasize the superficial drama surrounding the political "horse race" at the expense of substantive information necessary to make an informed vote decision.

It appears the news media may sometimes be torn between two imperatives. On one hand, the ultimate fate of democracy depends on the ability of citizens to inform themselves and act in their own perceived interests as they freely participate in self-government. In democratic societies, the mass media are generally charged with the responsibility of making available the information necessary for citizens to do so. On the other hand, the mass media must respond to another legitimate imperative -- economic self-preservation in a relatively free and competitive marketplace.

Realizing these two imperatives simultaneously poses a significant challenge to the news media. It might then be advantageous to determine empirically the potential demand for substantive political information, and the extent to which the information needs and intrinsic interests of the audience/electorate overlap.

These concerns have been addressed, in part, by a long tradition of of political communication research which has focused on the uses and influence of the mass media in the vote decision process. Our perspective and approach to these central questions have changed considerably over the years as more and more evidence has been brought to bear on them.

There is some evidence to suggest, however, that news media practices and priorities have not responded to these changes and, consequently, its content may satisfy neither the information needs nor the interests of the audience/electorate. This might have serious implications for the future of democracy and the continued economic viability of the news media in a changing marketplace.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The impact of the early voting studies

The early voting studies were influential because they were among the first of their kind to apply "modern" social science research and survey techniques. Perhaps more important, they provided empirical evidence that challenged conventional views of the electorate and the influence of mass media.

The early voting studies[1] dispelled the notion that the mass media have powerful, direct effects on political attitudes and behavior. They focused on the nature of the American electorate and generally concluded that most individual citizens did not conform to the assumptions or requirements of "classical" democratic theories.[2] These studies tended to characterize the average voter as largely uninformed, uninterested and inactive when it came to matters of politics. That citizens were uninformed appeared to be the result of pervasive low levels of political interest.[3] People who followed the election campaigns appeared to expose themselves selectively to information with which they already tended to agree. As a result, the vote appeared to be an expression of activated or reinforced partisan predispositions, and not a product of "rational" decision making based on evaluations of information gathered during the campaign. These early studies generally attributed the stability of partisan predispositions to selective psychological processes which presumably came into play to maintain cognitive consistency or balance.[4]

The implications of these early findings were not lost on democratic theorists.[5] Nor do they appear to have escaped the attention of media practioners and managers, especially in the formative years of television news broadcasting.[6]

The early voting studies seemed to imply that few people would be strongly interested in, or make great use of, substantive political information even if it were made more readily available as appeared possible with the continuing development of new mass communication technologies. The question for the news media appeared to be how to package its campaign and other news coverage and fulfill, at least in part, its responsibility to inform the public, without losing its audience and revenue base.[7]

The answer to this question appears to have come in the form of daily reports on the superficial or symbolic drama surrounding the political "horse race." In the years since the early voting studies and the advent of the televised presidential campaign, critics have increasingly charged that news media coverage has trivialized the election process, reduced it to the status of spectator sport, and failed to inform the public adequately.[8]

Content analyses have provided considerable support for many of these criticisms. Most notably, Patterson and McClure[9] found that newspaper and television coverage of the 1976 presidential election campaign focused primarily on candidate image, style and strategy, and popularity poll results. This emphasis appeared to come at the expense of substantive information about the candidates' positions and voting records on campaign issues and their abilities to implement these policy preferences and perform effectively in office.

Representatives of the news media have countered these charges with claims that the content of their campaign coverage reflects and satisfies audience demand and interests. To support these claims, they point to their ratings and circulation figures as well as the early empirical evidence which has become embedded in conventional wisdom.[10]

Although the news media may have managed to date to keep the attention of its audience, these figures tell us little about the substantive demands

for political information among viewers and readers. More important, the Patterson and McClure findings would not be so alarming if our perspective on the vote decision process and the uses of mass media had not, in fact, changed considerably since the early voting studies. Instead, the practices and priorities that appear manifest in news media content suggest the news media have not responded to these changes in the theoretical perspective of political communication research.

The contemporary perspective

As attention shifted somewhat from the demands of democracy on the individual citizen to the responsibility and performance of the news media, serious questions were raised concerning the extent to which the news media satisfy the information needs and interests of the audience/electorate. These questions became relevant, in large part, because the accumulating empirical evidence required significant changes in the theoretical perspective with regard to the nature of the vote decision process and mass media use.

Today, the vote is widely regarded as the product of cognitive information processing rather than that of psychological determinants.[11] The mass media are recognized as the primary source of political information to be processed, either directly or indirectly, because so few people are able to acquire it through direct or personal experience.[12] While social and psychological factors appear to influence how this information is selected and processed, the mass media clearly play a critical role in determining the quality and quantity of political information available for input.[13]

The quantity of this information is clearly not the issue. Graber observes the average American is confronted with an overwhelming and

never-ending flood of political information from the mass media.[14] What is at issue is the substance and quality of that information, as indicated by the findings of Patterson and McClure. Although we may be more sensitive to the economic and practical constraints on the news media to provide this information, Blumler suggests some of these constraints are unnecessarily self-imposed -- the news media may have seriously underestimated the need and desire among media users for this substantive information.[15]

The media uses and gratifications literature tends to confirm this observation.[16] It has discarded the notion of a passive audience in favor of an active one, engaged in routine and sometimes purposive scanning and surveillance of the social environment through the mass media, and then selecting information to be processed.[17] Graber suggests selectivity is inevitable and necessary to cope with the glut of available political information.[18] But much of the literature suggests this selection process is guided by other factors that are generally more important than the need for reinforcement or titillation, contrary to the conventional wisdom.[19]

Atkin clarified these factors and provided a useful conceptual model for understanding mass media exposure, information seeking and message selection.[20] He ultimately defined two major classes of motivations and desired gratifications. The first class is immediate consummatory gratifications sought from the process itself of exposing one's self to the mass media. These desired gratifications included entertainment, emotional arousal and intrinsic interest in a particular type of information. The second class can be defined as information needs. Atkin suggested that extrinsic uncertainty creates needs for information with instrumental utility -- information sought of selected as an aid in the construction of various adaptive responses to the environment. These responses might

be performance-related, as in deciding how to vote, or cognitive, affective or reinforcing.

News media practices and priorities appear to assume, at least implicitly, that entertainment and other immediate consummatory gratifications provide the primary determinants and motivations behind news media use. The uses and gratifications literature, however, consistently indicate this view is mistaken.[21] Among the most important reasons for news media exposure, attention and message receptivity are those related to the desired acquisition of information that will be useful in making an adaptive response such as the decision of how to vote.[22]

According to the Atkin model, message selection occurs when the estimated reward value exceeds the expected cost of obtaining and processing that information, relative to one's available resources. The utility of a message is then the product of both the information needs of the user and the characteristic of the message itself.[23]

The essential problem and research question

In this context, the nature of the problem becomes clear -- the reward value of available political information may be relatively less than the cost of obtaining and processing it. It appears that certain needs and desires for substantive political information exist, but are not being satisfied by the news media. This might be attributed to insufficient reward value of news media content and/or the prohibitive cost of obtaining it. Much of the recent literature suggests that news media content offers considerably more entertainment value than instrumental utility, and this does not appear to be sufficient to motivate its acquisition.[24]

Graber, on the other hand, identifies certain limitations in the

resources available to people who might obtain and process this information. While there is a perceived personal need and social norm to be informed, few people appear willing to go to great lengths to do so.[25]

This raises the essential and unanswered research question of where to locate the greatest responsibility for this problem -- does it reflect a failure of the news media to provide information useful in making a vote decision, or an audience/electorate with insufficient interest in such substantive political information?

The purpose of this research

This research examines aggregate public perceptions of the instrumental utility and interest value of information provided by the news media in their coverage of the 1984 presidential election campaign. An attempt was made to identify the perceived information needs and intrinsic interests of news media users, and the relative extent to which these needs and interests were perceived to be satisfied by news media campaign coverage.

In doing so, an attempt was made to overcome a limitation of many previous studies, by examining these perceptions and their interrelationships simultaneously with Galileo™ multidimensional scaling and mapping techniques.[26]

As both Graber and Atkin point out, information processing and its products are the result of an interaction between characteristics of the audience/electorate and mass media content.[27] Therefore, these two factors cannot be studied adequately in isolation. In other words, news media content should be evaluated in terms of audience needs, interests and abilities, and audience uses of the news media must be evaluated in terms of its content.

METHODS

The data were gathered in two phases during the 1984 presidential election campaign. In the first phase during early September, open-ended interviews were conducted with a small sample of Knoxville, Tennessee area adult residents to ascertain their attitudes and perceptions concerning the election campaign, its coverage by the news media and the types of information they found interesting or useful. These open-ended interviews were used to generate a list of salient objects and attributes commonly used by respondents to describe their perceptions and evaluations of news media content and campaign coverage. In the second phase of this research, a structured questionnaire was administered to a larger sample of Knoxville area adult residents. These respondents were provided a list of all possible pairs of concepts generated from the open-ended interviews and were asked to make direct magnitude estimates of the perceived distance between the two concepts in each pair. From these data, a multidimensional map of the perceived relationships among concepts was derived. This cognitive map was then used to represent aggregate public perceptions of the instrumental utility and intrinsic interest of political information available from the news media campaign coverage.

The open-ended interview phase

In early September, open-ended telephone interviews were conducted with a small, systematic sample of Knoxville area household members (n = 21) whose numbers were drawn from a local 1984 telephone directory. Respondents were selected at random within each household by identifying the adult member who had the most recent birthday. Demographic statistics from this sample compared favorably with known population parameters available from a

recent census.

Respondents were asked to (1) provide reasons for attending or not attending to the 1984 presidential election campaign, and to identify (2) their principal sources of information about the campaign, (3) the types of political information provided by the news media and other sources, (4) the types of information they found interesting and not interesting, and (5) the types of information they used to judge the candidates and decide how to vote. Neutral probes were used to elicit more detailed information about their perceptions of the campaign and news media coverage. The interviews lasted about 20 minutes.

The purpose of these open-ended interviews was to generate a list of terms or concepts most frequently mentioned by respondents when they discussed or described their perceptions and evaluations of various types of information that might be provided by the news media in their campaign coverage. Transcripts of the open-ended interviews were compared to select the most frequently mentioned and widely shared concepts, and substantial efforts were made to preserve the respondents' exact wording of these concepts to provide greater assurance they would be meaningful to other respondents sampled from this population.

The sample size proved to be adequate for the purpose of generating such a list of concepts. The concepts and exact words used by respondents to describe their perceptions became redundant after several interviews. Few new concepts or phrasings were introduced as the sample size increased with each additional interview.

The following list of 11 salient concepts (objects and attributes) was derived from the open-ended interview results:

(1) candidate leadership abilities
(2) voting records
(3) campaign promises
(4) mudslinging
(5) who's ahead in the polls
(6) interesting
(7) believable
(8) decide how to vote
(9) television news
(10) newspaper stories
(11) yourself

The first five concepts represent types of information that respondents most frequently mentioned as either available, interesting or useful to them. Concepts 9 and 10 represent the most frequently mentioned sources of information about politics and the election campaign. Concepts 6, 7 and 8 represent the attributes of these types of information and information sources most frequently mentioned as desirable. Concept 11, "yourself," represents the respondent.

The open-ended interviews themselves provided a rich base of qualitative data which tended to confirm the findings of Patterson and McClure and Blumler. Respondents were frequently critical of news media campaign coverage for not providing information that was either interesting or useful. The greater purpose of this research, however, was to map and examine the interrelationships among these concepts and better understand public perceptions and evaluations of news media campaign coverage.

Sampling procedures and sample characteristics

A second sample of 149 Knoxville area households was drawn systematically from the local phone directory. Respondents within each household were again selected randomly using the "last birthday" technique. A 66 percent response

rate yielded a sample of 99 Knoxville area adult residents. Of these respondents, 83 completed the entire 20-minute training and interview session.

This response rate was typical of that obtained from other Knoxville area and Tennessee surveys, and raised some concern about the representativeness of the obtained sample. The demographics of this sample, however, compared favorably with known population parameters and represented the wide range of characteristics expected from local residents. The Knoxville area has a significant rural and blue-collar population and a fairly large percentage of adult residents who have not completed high school, although this figure is somewhat lower than the 45 percent statewide. On the other hand, Knoxville is also the center of the state university system, Oak Ridge National Laboratories and the Tennessee Valley Authority. Many of the employees of these large local institutions have significant post-graduate training and degrees. Respondents in this sample ranged from age 18 to 81 and reported from 4 to 21 years of formal education. The typical respondent was 43 years old with 14 years of education (some college). The sample was equally split on sex, with 49 percent male and 51 percent female respondents. These characteristics approximated the demographic composition of the Knoxville area.

The structured interview phase

The list of 11 salient concepts generated during the open-ended interviews yielded 55 non-redundant pairs of concepts which were entered into a structured questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered to 99 respondents in a 20-minute telephone interview during the last six weeks of the 1984 presidential election campaign.

During these interviews, respondents were provided a pair of concepts -- "campaign promises" and"voting records" -- and were told these concepts differed by 100 units. They were then asked to use this reference stimulus or "yardstick" as a guide to estimate the distance or difference between the two concepts in each of the 55 pairs.

Prior to this data-gathering procedure, respondents participated in a brief instruction and training session designed to familiarize them with these direct magnitude separation estimate procedures. They were told that "an apple and an orange differ by 100 units" and were asked to use that yardstick to estimate the difference or distance between other fruits. For example, they were asked to estimate the difference between a lemon and a lime. They were instructed to provide a number larger than 100 if the lemon and lime were more different than an apple and an orange. If they thought the lemon and lime were less different than the yardstick, they were to provide a number smaller than 100. If the two concepts appeared to be no different at all, they were to say "zero." The greater the difference between the two concepts, the larger the number they were to provide.

After several examples, most of the respondents (n = 83) were able and willing to proceed to the main questionnaire. The questions were phrased in the following form:

> "If campaign promises and voting records differ by 100 units, how different are ... (for example) campaign promises and decide how to vote?"

In this manner, the respondents estimated the difference or distance between the two concepts in each of 55 pairs, using the reference pair or "yardstick" as their guide. These procedures yielded ratio level in the form of perceived distances and relationships among all 11 concepts in

the cognitive domain of evaluating the utility and value of information provided by the news media during the campaign.

The questionnaire also included a large number of conventional survey items designed to measure such variables as news media use, political interest, political efficacy, attention to the campaign, attitudes toward the news media and the usual demographics.

The derivation of cognitive maps

The Galileo™ computer program was used to derive multidimensional maps representing the perceived relationships among the 11 cognitive concepts in the domain of evaluating news media content and campaign coverage.[28] Each of these concepts was treated as a point in a multidimensional space, and its location (or "meaning") was defined by its perceived distance from (or perceived association with) the other concepts in that spatial domain. The program aggregated the estimated or perceived distance between the concepts in each of the 55 pairs and used these mean interpoint distances to derive a multidimensional map which preserves the perceived relationships among each of the concepts.

Data analysis strategy and procedures

The data were analyzed in several discrete phases. First, a multidimensional map was derived to represent the aggregate perceptions and evaluations of news media content. This map revealed the perceived relationships among 11 salient concepts derived from the open-ended interviews. These concepts include the self-concept "yourself," "television news," "newspaper stories," five types of political information and three attributes of these cognitive objects. These attributes are represented by the concepts "interesting," "believable" and "decide how to vote."

The evaluations of these concepts and their interrelationships were then assessed by examining the mean interpoint distances between concepts. It was assumed that the perceived degree of association between two concepts could be represented by their mean interpoint distance. The smaller the distance or separation, the greater the perceived association between two concepts.

In this manner, it was possible to determine the relative extent to which the two news media were associated with each of the five types of political information. Information emphasized in news media campaign coverage would be associated with the news media, and represented by a relatively small interpoint distance between the news media concepts and the information type concept. If, for example, respondents perceived that television news coverage provided more popularity poll results than information about the candidates' voting records, their aggregate responses would locate the concept "television news" closer to "who's ahead in the polls" and further from "voting records."

Similarly, evaluations of these types of information could be represented by the perceived distance between each concept and the various attributes. For example, the relative distance between the concepts "voting records" and "decide how to vote" was used to represent the instrumental utility of that particular type of information or content -- its perceived usefulness in making a vote decision. The distance between "voting records" and "interesting" was used in a similar manner to represent the respondents' intrinsic interest in that particular type of information. The smaller the mean interpoint distance between two concepts, the greater was their perceived association and, thus, the more positive was the evaluation of the cognitive object along that particular attribute.

Thus, we were able to determine the extent to which the respondents

in aggregate perceived each type of information to be provided by the news media, and the extent to which they found that information interesting and/or useful in making a vote decision.

The hypotheses and tests

The review of the literature suggested several hypotheses concerning these aggregate perceptions and evaluations revealed by the aggregate cognitive map. First, we might expect that respondents would associate the two news media more closely with the superficial or dramatic types of campaign information and less closely with the substantive types of information about the candidates' leadership abilities and voting records. Second, we might expect them to associate a vote decision more closely with this substantive information and less closely with information about the superficial or dramatic aspects of the campaign. Finally, we might expect that the patterns of perceptions concerning the availability and utility of substantive information would reverse with regard to the less substantive types of information. In other words, the types of information considered useful in deciding how to vote would be perceived as scarce in news media content, and information emphasized by the news media would be considered relatively less useful.

These hypotheses can be stated formally in terms of the expected distances between concepts:

H_1: Television news and newspaper stories will be located significantly closer to campaign promises, mudslinging and who's ahead in the polls than to candidate leadership abilities and voting records;

H_2: Decide how to vote will be located significantly closer to candidate leadership abilities and voting records than to campaign promises, mudslinging and who's ahead in the polls;

H_3: Voting records and candidate leadership abilities will be located significantly closer to decide how to vote and further from the two news media; campaign promises, mudslinging and who's ahead in the polls will be located significantly closer to the two news media than to decide how to vote.

T-tests were used to test these hypotheses and detect significant differences between other interpoint distances that represented the perceived association and evaluation of concepts.

Finally, attempts were made to validate the Galileo methodology and the interpretation of the data it yielded. In this phase of data analysis, respondents were classified into two distinct groups -- respondents who appeared relatively "satisfied" with news media content and those who appeared to be rather"critical" of it. This classification was made on the basis of their responses to a conventional measure of their attitudes toward news media performance. The cognitive maps were derived for each group so that group differences in the perception and evaluation of news media campaign coverage could be examined. If the method and data interpretation are valid, one would expect the "critical" group to evaluate the news media more negatively than would the "satisfied" group, and these negative evaluations should be evident in the perceived relationships among concepts in the cognitive maps.

This analysis is followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings in the context of the contemporary perspective on the uses and influence of news media in the vote decision process, the proper functioning of democracy and the continued economic viability of the news media in a rapidly changing marketplace.

RESULTS

The aggregate cognitive map

The data from this survey yielded a cognitive map with 11 dimensions, the first three factors of which account for more than 77 percent of the total variance. This is advantageous because it is difficult to visualize more than three dimensions at one time. Figure One presents the locations of the 11 concepts in these first three dimensions or principal planes. This aggregate map appears to confirm our hypotheses, although these relationships are even more apparent when the concepts are mapped in two dimensions (see Figure Two). Although the two-dimensional map is easier to read, some information is invariably lost when the dimensionality is reduced. The map in Figure Two was derived from two factors which account for 61 percent of the total variance.

These aggregate maps appear to confirm our expectations about the relationships among the 11 concepts. "Decide how to vote" is located closer to "candidate leadership abilities" and "voting records," and is located much further from the concepts "campaign promises," "who's ahead in the polls" and "mudslinging." Thus, it appears that respondents perceive these two substantive types of information are the more useful in making a vote decision. This substantive information, however, is not associated with the two news media -- "candidate leadership abilities" and "voting records" are located much further from "television news" and "newspaper stories" than are "campaign promises" and "who's ahead in the polls." The concept "mudslinging" is located closer to the news media than it is to "decide how to vote."

From these maps, it would appear that respondents perceive the news media to place a much greater emphasis on the dramatic or symbolic aspects

Figure One

THE AGGREGATE COGNITIVE SPACE IN THREE DIMENSIONS

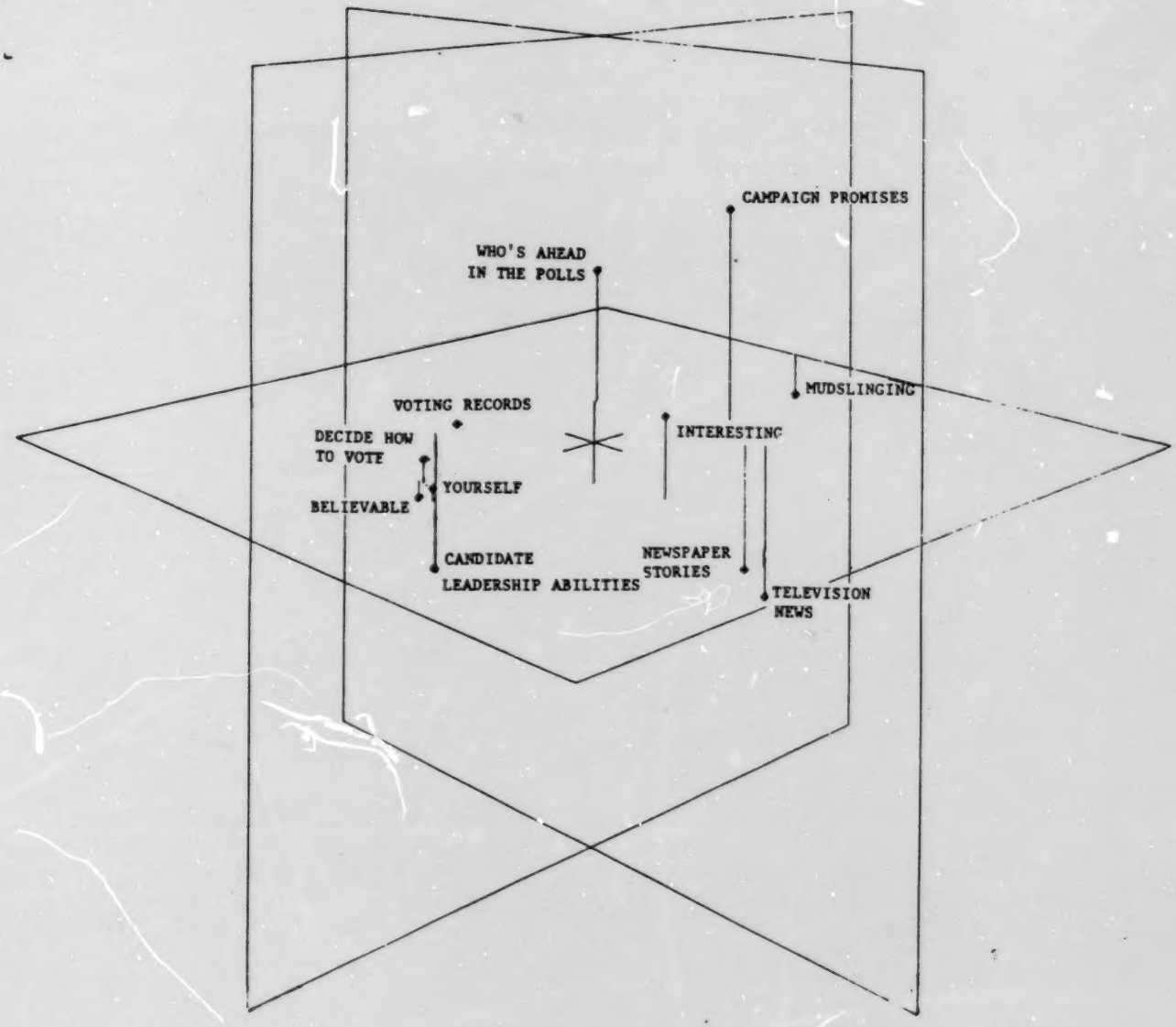
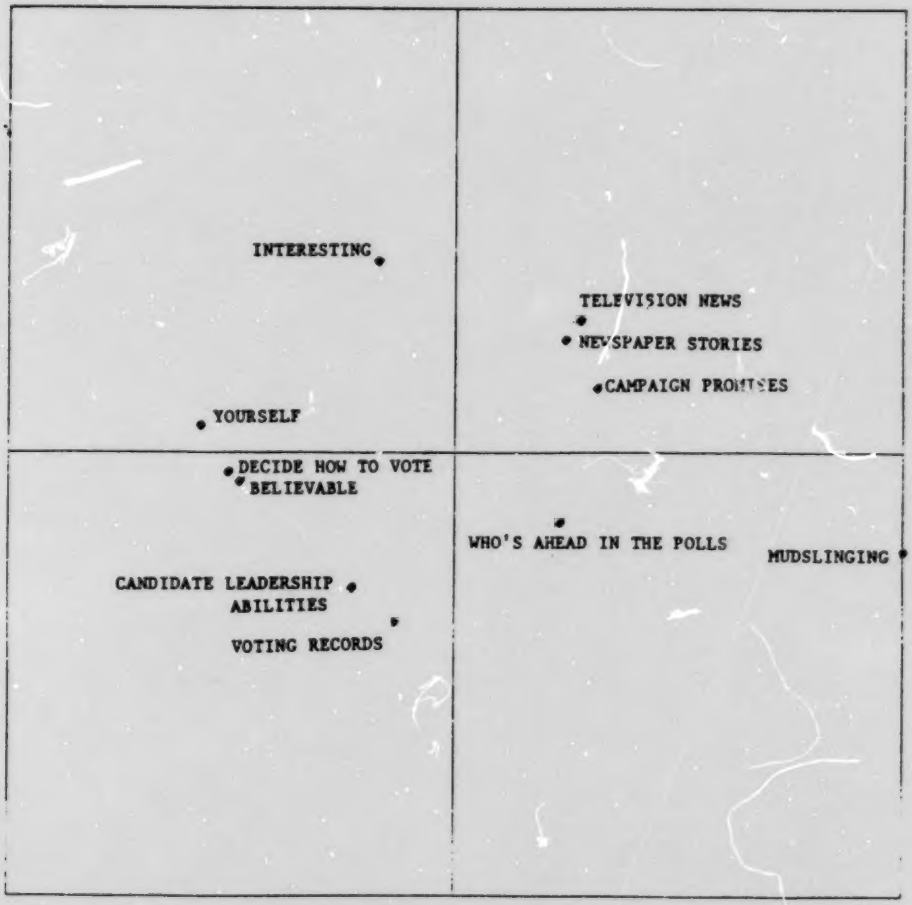


Figure Two

THE AGGREGATE COGNITIVE SPACE IN TWO DIMENSIONS



of the campaign than they do on the substantive types of information believed to be most useful in making a vote decision.

Testing the hypotheses

This visual analysis, however, does not provide for an adequate test of our hypotheses. It was necessary to examine and perform statistical tests on the mean interpoint distances between concepts in all 11 dimensions. Table One presents these aggregate perceived distances between selected concepts. Again, the greater the distance between concepts, the more different these concepts were perceived to be. T-tests were performed to determine whether the mean distance between a pair of concepts was significantly greater than the distance between other pairs.

The first two columns of figures in Table One represent the mean interpoint distance between each of the two news media and the five types of information. In general, respondents did not perceive the two news media were significantly different with regard to the relative emphasis placed on each of the five types of information, with one important exception. The respondents estimated that "mudslinging" was only 91 units from "television news," on the average, but it was 102 units from "newspaper stories." This suggests that respondents perceive significantly more mudslinging in television campaign coverage than in newspaper coverage of the campaign. This difference was statistically significant ($t = 1.86$ with 80 df, one-tailed $p < .05$).

Respondents also appear to have perceived that both of the news media place more emphasis on campaign promises and popularity poll results than on substantive information about the candidates' leadership abilities and voting records. In aggregate, respondents estimated that campaign promises and who's ahead in the polls were only 92 units from television news,

TABLE ONE

MEAN PERCEIVED DISTANCES BETWEEN SELECTED KEY CONCEPTS

Type of information	Television news	Newspaper stories	Decide how to vote	Interesting
Candidate leadership abilities	105	100	69	97
Voting records	109	102	67	99
Campaign promises	92	94	110	76
Mudslinging	91	102	148	136
Who's ahead in the polls	92	92	130	100

whereas candidate leadership abilities was located 105 units from television news and voting records was 109 units from the news medium. The latter difference approaches statistical significance ($t = 1.41$ with 79 df, one-tailed $p < .10$) A similar pattern of perceptions was evident for newspaper stories. These differences appear in the hypothesized direction, but a larger sample size may be necessary to confirm the first hypothesis that the audience/electorate perceived the news media to emphasize the dramatic aspects of the campaign at the expense of substantive information useful in deciding how to vote.

Nevertheless, it is clear from Table One that respondents perceive substantive information about the candidates' leadership abilities and voting records is significantly more useful in making a vote decision than are the dramatic or superficial types of information. In aggregate, respondents estimated that the concept "decide how to vote" was only 69 units from candidate leadership abilities and only 67 units from voting records. At the same time, they perceived the vote decision to be much further from campaign promises (110 units), who's ahead in the polls (130 units) and mudslinging (148 units). The t-test that even the smallest difference in these perceived distances was statistically significant -- the 69 units separating the vote decision and candidate leadership abilities was significantly less than the 110 units separating the vote decision and campaign promises ($t = 2.40$ with 80 df, one-tailed $p < .01$). Thus, each of the two types of substantive information was considered significantly more useful than any other type of information, at the alpha = .01 level. This confirmed the second hypothesis.

Furthermore, Table One clearly indicates that the types of information that the respondents value as most useful in deciding how to vote were emphasized least in the news media coverage, and the types of information

emphasized most were perceived to be the least useful. This pattern of perceptions was statistically significant and clearly indicates there exists a dramatic discrepancy between these information needs and news media campaign coverage, as predicted in hypothesis three.

On one hand, voting records was located only 67 units from the vote decision, but it was 109 units from television news and newspaper stories ($t = 4.27$ with 80 df, one-tailed $p < .001$; $t = 3.16$ with 81 df, $p < .001$). The same significant pattern was evident for candidate leadership abilities ($t = 1.95$ with 79 df, one-tailed $p < .05$; $t = 1.91$ with 80 df, one-tailed $p < .05$). In other words, the two types of information considered most useful in deciding how to vote were perceived to be neglected in news media coverage of the campaign.

On the other hand, respondents also clearly perceived that the least useful types of information were emphasized most by the news media. For example, who's ahead in the polls was located only 92 units from each of the two news media, and yet it was perceived to be 130 units distant from decide how to vote. These differences were significant for both television news and newspaper stories ($t = 2.26$ with 79 df, one-tailed $p < .02$; $t = 2.30$ with 80 df, one-tailed $p < .02$). A similar significant pattern was evident for mudslinging ($t = 4.15$ with 79 df, $p < .001$; $t = 3.44$ with 80 df, $p < .001$).

In short, these data indicate there is an inverse relationship between the perceived utility of information and the extent to which the news media are perceived to provide it. This clearly suggests the news media did not satisfy the information needs of respondents in this sample.

At this point, representatives of the news media might argue that the instrumental utility of its content is not a primary determinant of news media use, and that it is necessary to emphasize the superficial and

dramatic aspects of the campaign to capture and sustain audience interest. This proposition was submitted for equivalent empirical tests.

Mudslinging was associated more closely with television news than was any other information type. But mudslinging was not only considered the least useful information, it was rated the least interesting as well -- located 136 units from interesting. T-tests revealed that mudslinging was considered significantly less interesting than who's ahead in the polls ($t = 1.98$ with 80 df, one-tailed $p < .05$) and any other type of information. Mudslinging may provide drama, but respondents found it neither enlightening nor interesting.

Perhaps more important, respondents appeared to associate campaign promises and who's ahead in the polls more closely with the news media than they did the two substantive types of information. They also perceived that campaign promises and poll results were significantly closer to interesting than decide how to vote, indicating they felt this information was more interesting than useful ($t = 2.20$ with 82 df, one-tailed $p < .05$; $t = 2.07$ with 80 df, one-tailed $p < .05$). Nevertheless, respondents did not perceive campaign promises and popularity poll results were significantly more interesting than substantive information about the candidates' leadership abilities and voting records. Although the differences in the instrumental utilities of information were large enough to be statistically significant, no such differences could be detected in the interest values of these types of information.

From these data, it would be difficult to conclude that audience interest in the hoopla of the political horse race precludes the news media from fulfilling their democratic responsibility to inform the public. Although the instrumental utility of information does not necessarily make it significantly more interesting, it appears this imbalance in campaign

coverage could be corrected to satisfy better the information needs of the audience/electorate without a significant reduction in its interest and attention.

Validation procedures and results

It was possible to validate the Galileo method and the obtained data which underlie the above interpretation and findings. In addition to the Galileo paired-comparison items, the structured questionnaire included a number of conventional, five-point Likert items designed to measure perceptions and attitudes toward the news media and its content. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of several statements, including "the news media don't really report about the things that are important to people like me when we decide how to vote." The responses to this item were: strongly agree (6 percent), agree (31 percent), feel neutral (10 percent), disagree (48 percent) and strongly disagree (4 percent).

This bimodal distribution of responses suggested that respondents could be classified into two fairly distinct groups split at the median -- the 48 percent who reported they were rather critical of news media content, and the 52 percent who appeared fairly satisfied with it. The sample was divided accordingly, so that the cognitive maps of the two groups could be derived and compared. If the data were meaningful and the interpretation was valid, we would expect that group differences in satisfaction with news media content would be expressed and evident in terms of the relationships among concepts in the two cognitive maps. These maps might also suggest possible sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with campaign coverage in the media.

Figures Three and Four present the three-dimensional cognitive

Figure Three

THREE-DIMENSIONAL COGNITIVE SPACE FOR "SATISFIED" GROUP

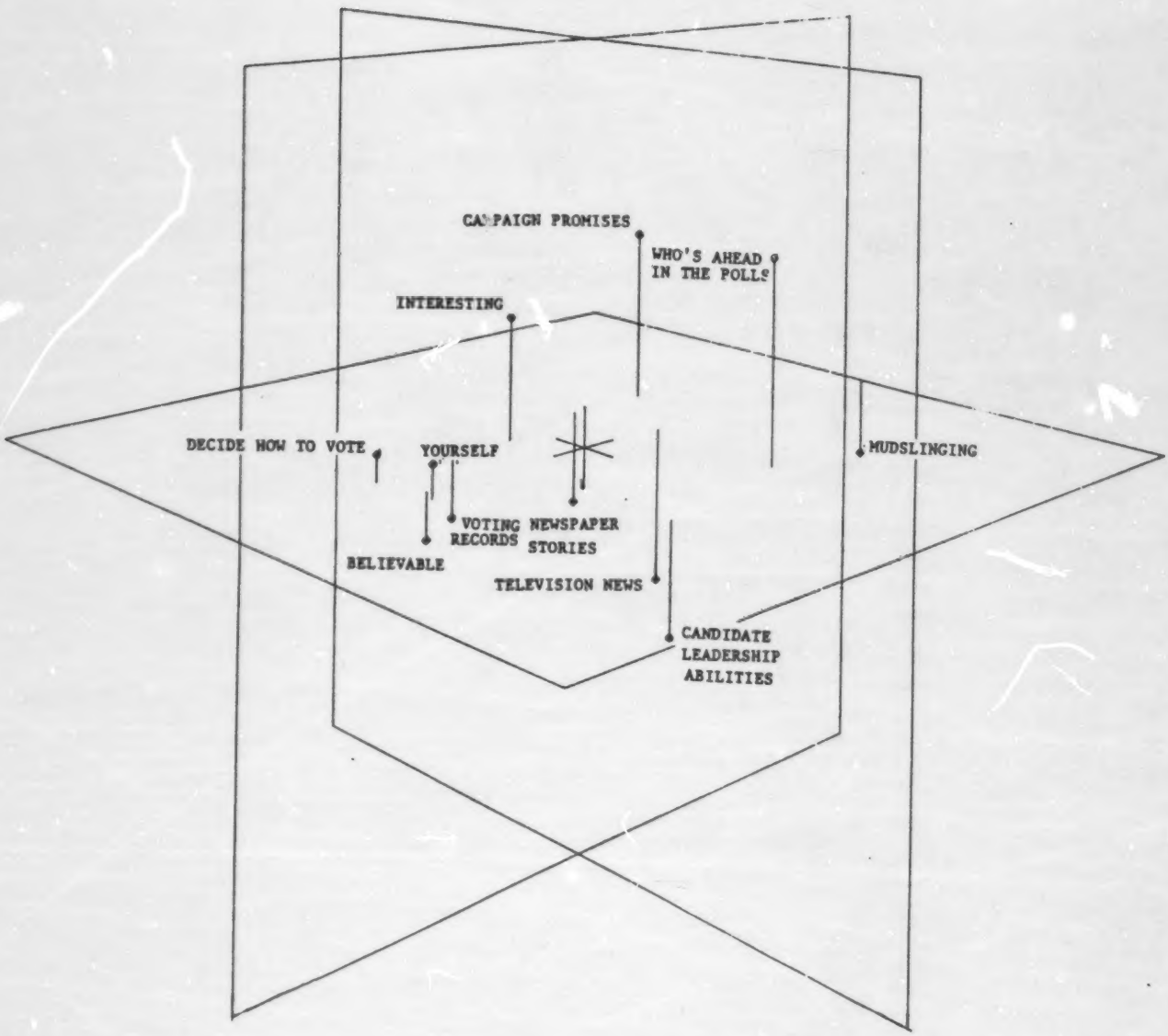


Figure Four

THREE-DIMENSIONAL COGNITIVE SPACE FOR "CRITICAL" GROUP

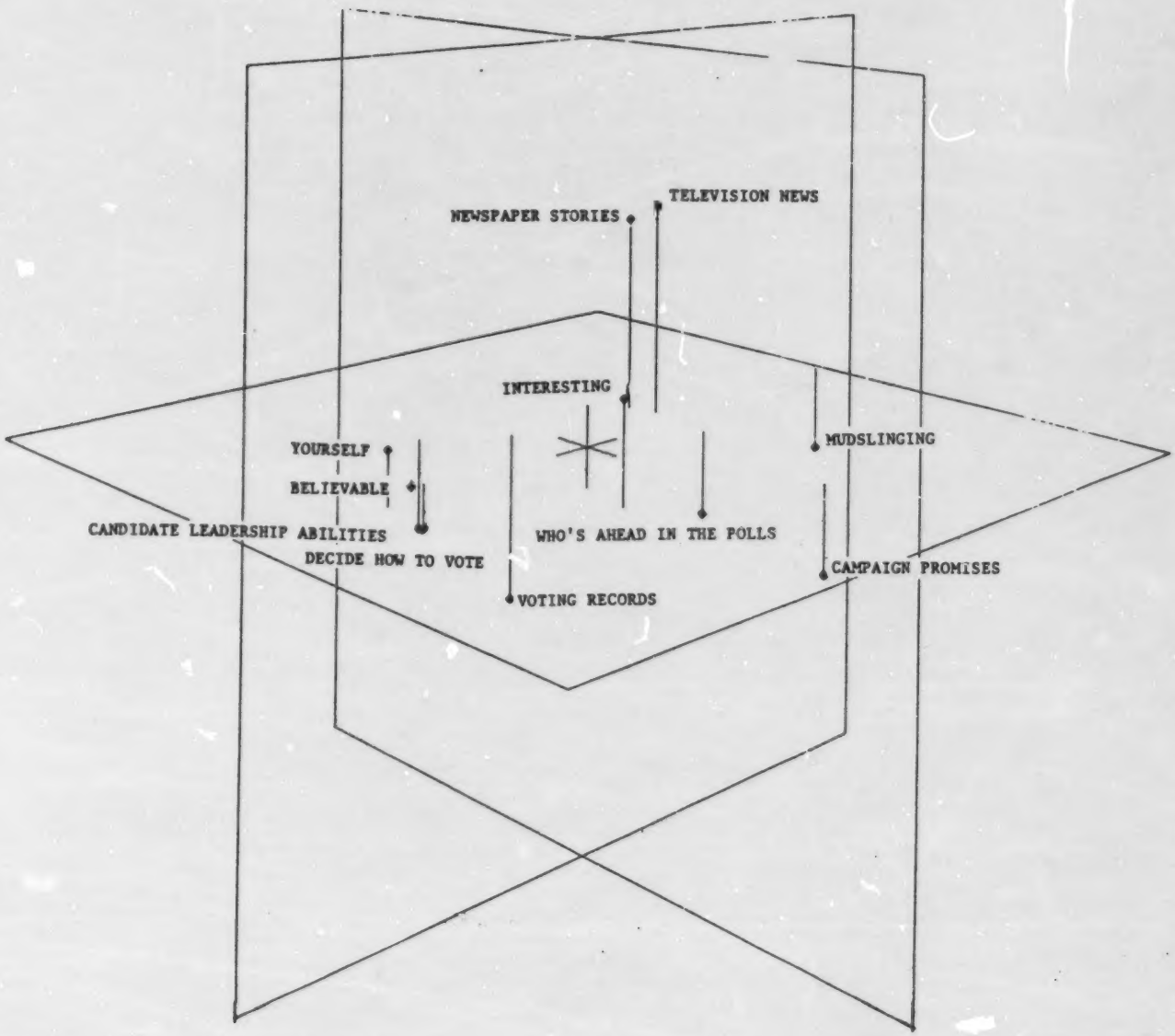


Figure Five

TWO-DIMENSIONAL COGNITIVE SPACE FOR "SATISFIED" GROUP

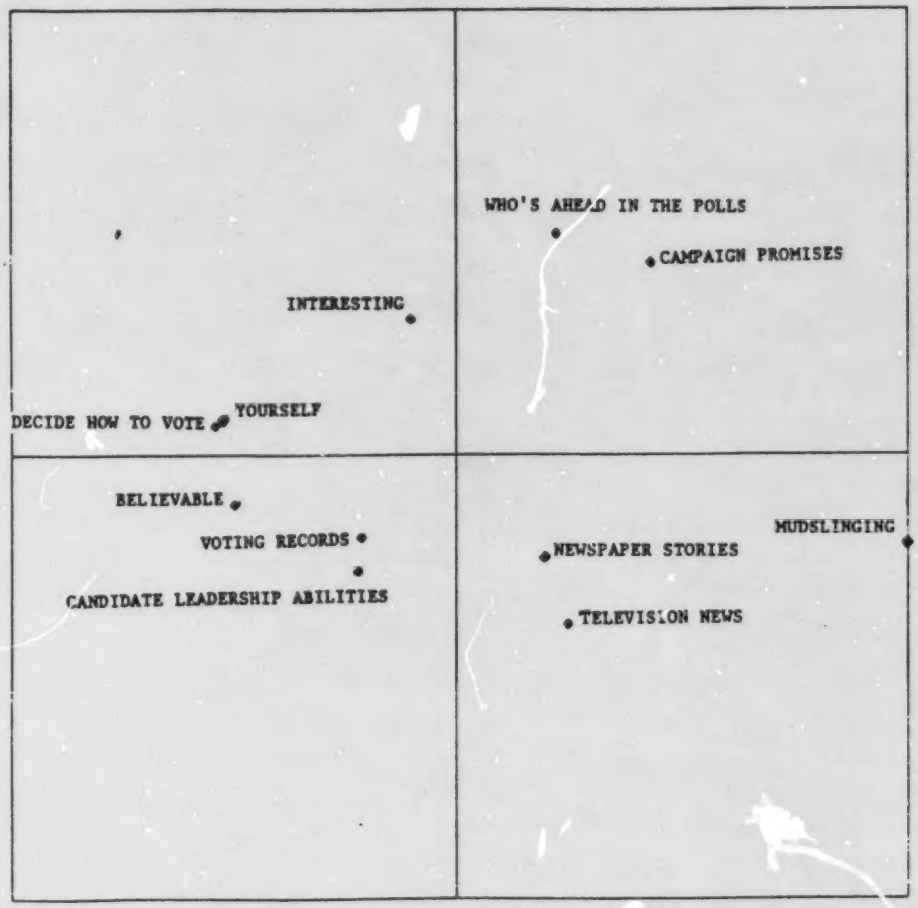
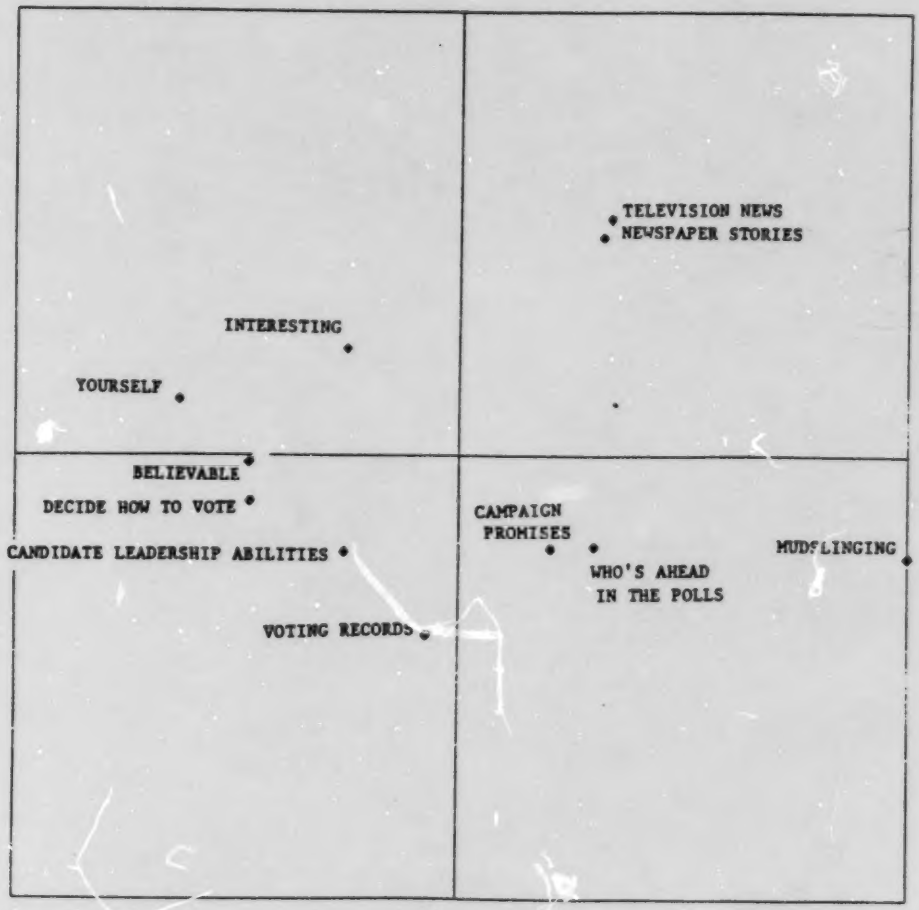


Figure Six

TWO-DIMENSIONAL COGNITIVE SPACE FOR "CRITICAL" GROUP



cognitive maps for the "satisfied" and the "critical" groups. The first three factors account for 81 and 78 percent of the respective variance in responses for the two groups. Although some differences between the two configurations are apparent, it is somewhat difficult to locate these discrepancies visually. Figures Five and Six locate these concepts in two dimensions, but a fair amount of information is invariably lost in the process. For this reason, it was again useful to break these maps down into their component interpoint distances.

Table Two reveals the mean perceived distance between television news and each of the five types of political information for the two groups of respondents. It appears that both "satisfied" and "critical" respondents associated the dramatic or superficial types of information with television news. Significant differences were detected, however, between the two groups with regard to the perceived emphasis on substantive information about the candidates' leadership abilities and voting records.

Respondents who perceived television news to be close to voting records (72 units) and candidate leadership abilities (76 units) also indicated on the conventional measure that they were satisfied with news media campaign coverage. Other respondents perceived television news to be significantly further from voting records (106 units) and candidate leadership abilities (100 units) and comprised the group which reported on the conventional measure that it was critical of news media content ($t = 3.00$, one-tailed $p < .01$; $t = 1.94$, one-tailed $p < .05$). The exact same significant pattern was found for group differences in the perceptions of newspaper stories, as indicated in Table Three.

These findings provide empirical assurance that the cognitive maps and the direct magnitude separation estimates from which they were derived can be interpreted in a meaningful manner. These comparisons also suggest

TABLE TWO

MEAN PERCEIVED DISTANCE BETWEEN "TELEVISION NEWS" AND FIVE TYPES OF INFORMATION BY SATISFACTION WITH NEWS MEDIA CONTENT

Type of information	Satisfied group	Critical group	T-test result
Candidate leadership abilities	76	100	$t = 1.94$, $p < .05$
Voting records	72	106	$t = 3.00$, $p < .01$
Campaign promises	80	88	NS
Mudslinging	75	84	NS
Who's ahead in the polls	71	75	NS

TABLE THREE

MEAN PERCEIVED DISTANCE BETWEEN "NEWSPAPER STORIES" AND FIVE TYPES OF INFORMATION BY SATISFACTION WITH NEWS MEDIA CONTENT

Type of information	Satisfied group	Critical group	T-test result
Candidate leadership abilities	68	99	t= 2.86, p<.01
Voting records	65	89	t= 2.08, p<.05
Campaign promises	78	87	NS
Mudslinging	77	84	NS
Who's ahead in the polls	67	80	NS

that the perceived failure of the news media to satisfy needs for substantive political information may account for the fact that nearly half of the respondents appeared critical of the news media.

Discussion and implications of the findings

The significance of these findings is not limited to statistics. Nonetheless, they do suggest a useful approach to the study of media uses and gratifications. By using direct magnitude estimation and multidimensional scaling techniques, it was possible to examine the characteristics of news media content and the audience/electorate simultaneously. The results of the validation procedures provide additional assurance that the meaning people assign to a concept can be represented by its spatial relationships with other concepts. After the brief instruction period, respondents appeared to have little difficulty expressing their perceptions of news media content, instrumental utility and intrinsic interest in terms of the differences or distances between concepts. This was due, in part, to the selection of concepts whose meaning appeared to be widely shared by respondents in the open-ended interview phase. It was possible to minimize threats to validity and reliability by using concepts which were chosen by, and meaningful to, respondents in their own common vernacular. The data presented here suggests these procedures were successful and the method offers a powerful and more precise measurement instrument.

More significant, these methods made it possible to test several propositions that were accepted on the basis of assertion or assumption. First, previous research was forced to make assumptions about what constituted "substantive" information. This information was operationalized in the political context here as information associated with the vote decision. Respondents appeared fully conscious of their information needs, and significant differences

could be detected in their estimates of the distance between "decide how to vote" and each of the five types of information. These significant findings confirm previous uses and gratifications research, by making clear than respondents recognize a strong need for information with instrumental utility such as news about candidate leadership abilities, qualifications, policy preferences and voting records.

This useful and needed information, however, was perceived to be emphasized less by the news media than was information about the dramatic aspects of the campaign, as one might suspect from earlier content analyses. More important, this research and method provides a crucial link between the content analysis and the uses and gratifications survey by enabling investigators to examine audience, media and message characteristics simultaneously. The resultant findings provide stronger support for the inference that the news media are not satisfying the information needs of the audience/electorate.

Nor does insufficient audience interest appear to provide an adequate rationale for the news media's emphasis on information with presumed entertainment value at the apparent expense of information with instrumental utility. It was possible to test the apparent presumption of the news media concerning the intrinsic interests of its audience. Although the democratic theorist may be disappointed to find that audience interests did not correspond better with its perceived information needs, these data do indicate that information with perceived utility is not necessarily rendered uninteresting.

While it was difficult to determine with these data what the relative demands were for information with instrumental utility and interest value, it remains clear the news media did not satisfy the perceived information needs of the audience/electorate sampled. This is further supported by the evidence they were able to discriminate between different types of information

on the basis of its instrumental utility and could not do so with regard to their perceived interest in that information. Everything except mudslinging appears somewhat interesting, but the utility of these types of information is perceived to vary greatly and candidate leadership abilities and voting records stand out as information rated high in both regards. Replications of these findings might provide compelling evidence for the news media that both audience needs and interests might be satisfied by more substantive coverage.

The quality of this coverage is of critical concern for the proper functioning of democratic society because the contemporary literature suggests the news media are the primary source of information to be selected and processed before citizens decide for whom, and if, to vote.

In light of this literature and the data analyzed here, it appears that contemporary news media practices and priorities may threaten to make the dismal findings of the early voting studies an enduring reality or self-fulfilling prophecy in which citizens not afforded adequate opportunities to inform themselves at low personal cost remain uninformed, unable to recognize their self-interests and unable to cast "rational" ballots expressing those perceived interests. Such citizens are not likely to develop or maintain an interest in politics and may even be discouraged from participating in democratic self-government.

Blumler cites evidence of a "crisis in democracy" and suggests political communication researchers respond by discarding the notion their work is value-free and finding ways to use the mass media to foster "political literacy" and broader, more-informed participation.[29] But in doing so, he also suggests they accept the reality of the profit motive and the imperative of economic self-preservation. The research question then becomes -- how can it be made profitable for the news media to meet the information needs of the audience/electorate in democratic society?

The research findings presented here suggest it might be possible to increased the reward value of news media content, lower the cost of obtaining substantive political information and thereby fulfill unsatisfied needs for useful information -- without losing the interest and attention of the audience. In fact, such changes may be necessary to ensure continued economic viability in an increasingly competitive market in which new communication technologies could lure away dissatisfied news media users.

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